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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the value and components of developing prereading skills to improve students' reading comprehension. Prereading activities are seen to prepare the student to both read and comprehend the story and involve cognitive engagement with ideas crucial to comprehension of the reading material. Teachers are urged to develop the student's background knowledge, including activating prior knowledge in a prereading schema or mental set. The paper also stresses the importance of clarifying central concepts of the story, teaching new vocabulary, and previewing the story to pique interest. A sample directed reading lesson is appended. (Contains 13 references.) (DB)

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Prereading activities: A key to comprehension

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When one has a task to accomplish, before proceeding, he/she develops a plan. For example, before embarking on a trip, he/she makes plans, reviews maps and decides routes. If he/she chooses an interstate route, an scenic opportunity that could have made this trip memorable is bypassed. In like manner, the teacher, with only cursory interest in the content of prereading activities, may begin the reading lesson by moving quickly through the content of prereading activities. Decoding may take place; however, activities that could have made the reading experience more meaningful were bypassed. Because of the "route" taken, after the reading trip, gaps in comprehension remain.

Emphasis on prereading activities appears to be directly related to the reading teacher's perception of the value of these activities. Prereading activities may be viewed as a perfunctory task, and driven by the content in the teacher's manual of the basal text (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). For instance, vocabulary taught for a rote response of a definition may improve knowledge of word meaning (Pany & Jenkins, 1978; Pany, & Scheck, 1982), but not aid story comprehension. As well, providing background

knowledge that is not central to story meaning, does not improve comprehension. Suggestions in teacher's manuals often focus attention on peripheral issues rather than on issues central to understanding the story (Idol, 1988; Durkin, 1984), and thus, are not helpful in building background. This article focuses on the necessary components of prereading activities.

Road Map to Prereading Activities

What prereading activities constitute the necessary components to establish the foundation prerequisite for comprehending the story? Effective prereading activities entail more than mechanically following the suggested sequence in the teacher's guide. As the teacher develops a lesson plan, s/he considers pupils' **prior knowledge**. If there is evidence of gaps that could interfere with understanding, the teacher supplies background knowledge. Pupils' prior knowledge provides the pathway to understanding new ideas and forms the foundation for the mental set or motivation. For comprehension of the story to take place, the unknown is linked to a foundation of prior knowledge based upon life experiences. From building upon the familiar in the **mental set**, the lesson then provides information

necessary to clarify important concepts. Therefore, prereading activities involve cognitive engagement with ideas that provide the foundation crucial to understanding important concepts in the story, and consequently to comprehension of the whole.

Developing Background Knowledge

Prior knowledge, as it relates to reading comprehension, is the total of the pupil's past experiences. The specific background that a reader needs to comprehend a selection varies with the plot of each story. The schema the reader develops through past experiences forms the basis for his or her prior knowledge on a particular topic. If prior knowledge is lacking or is not activated, the pupil has difficulty comprehending the text being read (Anderson et al, 1985). The reader stores concepts, ideas, and relationships in memory and activates them as needed. Throughout the process of reading, the reader constantly takes the information gained from the text, relates it to an existing schema, and expands that schema to form a new schema (Idol, 1988; Beck & McKeown, 1986). Therefore, the teacher assists readers activate or recall from his or her past experiences, the background knowledge needed to comprehend a

particular selection; or, if necessary, provides the reader any key information that is not available from prior knowledge. The teacher provides scaffolding between pupils' knowledge base and story concepts; thus, a relationship is established, and comprehension occurs.

Hence, prereading activities include: the mental set (set induction or motivation), background information and key concepts, essential vocabulary, and the story preview which redirects the students' thoughts toward the story to be read.

In preparation for teaching, the teacher carefully reads the story. He/she makes judgments regarding the gaps that could interfere with text comprehension. Therefore, once the objective and rationale is clarified, attention focuses on developing the mental set.

Mental Set

To generate interest in the story, the teacher chooses an aspect that can be linked to pupils' prior experiences. New information that is to be learned can only be comprehended through building connections to information that already exists in the pupil's knowledge base or schema. For example, an event, such

as a birthday, a new baby, or a trip, brings images of past experiences to the mind of each child. In like manner, an emotion, such as happiness or fear, generates images of past events or experiences that relate to feelings that the pupil recalls. Hence, the mental set builds on prior knowledge, and proceeds to weave in the objective and rationale of the lesson. Once the teacher has piqued the pupils' interest, s/he moves to provide the important information, and then to clarify concepts central to comprehending the core message of the story.

Clarifying the central concept

If one arrives late and misses the beginning of a play or movie, s/he continually fails to understand the meaning of characters' actions, due to the absence of the foundation provided in the beginning of the play. For example, if a pupil begins reading a story in which the setting is a northern city with a raging blizzard, understanding the implications of a fierce storm is influenced by the fact that the child lives in the desert southwest. Therefore, for comprehension to occur, time is spent teaching what a blizzard is, what can happen, and in some way, connecting the blizzard experience to a facet of the students' prior knowledge.

After identifying the concept to be clarified, the teacher guides brainstorming for ideas. The ideas are represented graphically, as well as logically, through completing a web or cluster (Appendix A). The ideas generated provide a structure to organize and redefine their conceptual framework in an accurate manner (Cooper, 1986). Webbing helps the reader understand relationships among ideas; and therefore, develop appropriate schema or frame of reference for comprehending the text. This activity tells the teacher what information S/he must supply or weave into the students' existing knowledge base. Misconceptions that influence understanding or comprehension are identified. If background information is lacking, the gaps are filled. For example, if the setting is not familiar, the teacher takes time to display a map, pinpoint the area, and help the pupils assimilate the ramifications of this location to the story.

Vocabulary

Next, the teacher selects words that are crucial to story comprehension. The teacher eliminates words that are already a part of pupils' vocabulary, as well as, words whose meaning can be gleaned through context. After eliminating these identified words, the lesson

focuses on teaching the remaining words. The number of vocabulary to be taught is limited to five to ten words. If there are more words, probably the story is too difficult. One must be aware that these words may not be the same words that are included as vocabulary words in the teachers' manual (Beck, Perfetti, & McKeown, 1982; Cooper, 1986).

In addition, the teacher must be aware that teaching vocabulary for understanding involves more than gaining a pupils' rote recall of a definition (Idol, 1988). To facilitate pupils' understanding of the vocabulary, words are taught by: (a) modeling the meaning of words, (b) using synonyms (using the word or several words that reveal the unknown word's meaning), or (c) teaching definitions (Carnine & Silbert, 1990). If words are taught by definition, any words used in the definition should be familiar, and already a part of the pupil's vocabulary. For learning disabled pupils, often the dictionary is not a good source, as the dictionary may state a definition using words with which the pupil is not familiar.

To enhance understanding, abstract words are made concrete through the use of: (a) verbal or mental imagery, (b) keywords linked to familiar examples

(Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1987; Stall & Fairbanks, 1986;), and (c) positive and negative examples (Carnine & Silbert, 1990). Vocabulary instruction goes beyond pupils' ability to repeat a definition. The goal of vocabulary instruction is to incorporate activities that promote understanding of the words, and provide a link to their use in the story.

Story preview

The story preview consists of several sentences that tell about the story, and serve to pique pupils' interest. A question concludes the story preview, and refocuses the pupils' attention on the story to be read (Appendix A).

Prereading activities fulfill several purposes including: (a) Motivating pupils' interest in the story by linking the story to their prior experiences, and thus enhancing its relevance; (b) establishing the objective and rationale that substantiate the importance of the reading activities; and (c) clarifying concepts and vocabulary to lay the foundation on which comprehension is to be built (Afflerbach, 1990). To summarize, prereading activities prepare the student to both read and comprehend the story.

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Appendix A

THE DIRECTED READING LESSON *

I. PREREADING ACTIVITIES

MENTAL SET

Have you ever had to move? Move somewhere far away? away from friends? family? school? etc. What was it like-or what would it be like?

The teacher elicits responses from students.

S: It's hard to move
S: You have to find new friends
S: Go to a new school
S: Learn your way around a new place
S: You have to pack up all your stuff and sometimes you have to throw some things away

T: Sometimes moves are fun and exciting but it can also be scary. You have to meet new people, go to a new school, ride a different bus. The foods you eat might be different. The places might be so different that you can't do the things you used to do. For example: If you lived by the water and moved to a city far from the water, you wouldn't be able to play on the beach, build sandcastles, go swimming etc.

BUILD BACKGROUND; CLARIFY CONCEPTS

WEBBING

We are going to be reading a story about a girl who has to move away to a new place. Before we read the story lets talk a little bit more about moving.

(The teacher and students brainstorm on the topic of moving. She will briefly explain brainstorming)

Let's think up all the things we can about moving. You can say anything you're thinking about. I'll list them on the board. No response is wrong.

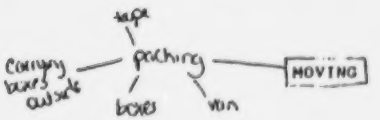
What are some of the things we think about when we move?

(Teacher writes moving in center of board and lists ideas to the left.)

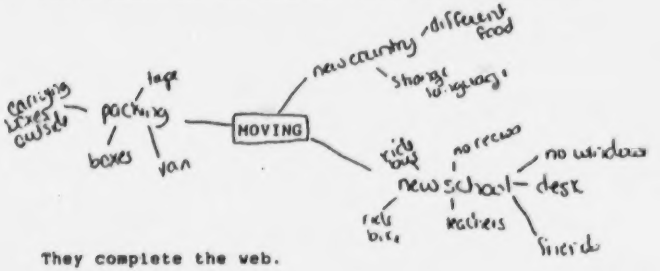
boxes
vans
packing
new friends
new school
ride bus
new country
change language

MOVING

After they finish brainstorming, the teacher writes the topic and puts a box around it. She selects an idea and writes it nearby. She discusses if and how it relates to the topic. She draws a line to show the relationship.



The teacher has the students continue taking turns.



They complete the web.

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

Now that we understand everything that goes along with moving, there are some words we need to go over to help us understand the story.

Teacher states the new word and its definition and has students say the definition.

T: Here is a new word. Tremble. Tremble means to shake. What does Tremble mean?
S: to shake

Teacher presents positive and negative examples

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until the students make 5 consecutive correct responses. Examples are not repeated in the same order.

T: Tom shaked in fear when his brother screamed BOO!. Did Tom trumble?
S: yes
T: The house didn't shake at all in a high wind storm. Did it tremble?
S: no
T: Sara was very cold because she left her winter coat at home. Would Sara be trembling?
S: yes
T: The cat shook in fear as the dog chased him up the tree. Did the cat tremble?
S: yes
T: When John heard the great news, goose pimples popped up all over his body. Did John tremble?
S: yes
T: When Mary walked home in the cold she was wearing her coat, mittens, and hat. Did she tremble?
S: no

Note: The teacher can also provide practice by asking students to generate examples. "Tell me about something that can tremble."

The teacher reviews new word and other words until students answer all questions correctly.

words: helpless (synonym)
remembered (definition)
terrifying (synonym)
pressure (synonym)
guided (definition)
experiences (definition)
partners (definitions)

STORY PREVIEW

We're going to read a story about a little girl, Megan, whose life changes when her father decides they must move to Boston. This move is very difficult for Megan because she is blind.

T: What do you think Megan feels like moving away to a new place?
S: scared
T: How does being blind make the move more difficult?
S: She won't be able to get around. She'll need someone to take her.

T: The title of the story is "A Bowl of Sun." That sounds like a strange title for this story. What do you think the title means and/or how does it relate to the story?
S: something about a yellow bowl
S: her life is like a bowl of sunshine

Those are both good speculations (guesses) about what the story might be about.

* written by Melissa Meretsky